

Haitian apparel workers continue strike, defying threats and violence

By John Marion
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Haitian textile workers are courageously continuing a strike in Port-au-Prince to demand an increase in the minimum wage to 800 gourdes (approximately \$12.70) per day, despite violence and threats by factory owners to take jobs out of the country. The current minimum wage is only 300 gourdes.

On Monday, several thousand workers marched peacefully through the streets of Port-au-Prince, blocking traffic. *Alterpresse* quoted one of the strikers: “We are in the streets to demand 800 gourdes as a salary. The bosses treat us badly while their dogs are treated well.”

The strike began on May 19 at the SANOPI industrial park in Port-au-Prince. The following Tuesday, tear gas was fired at striking workers by the Haitian National Police, and union leaders offered within days of the strike’s beginning to settle for only 400 gourdes plus a promise of old age benefits. More than a month later, a placard in Monday’s demonstration defied such treachery and demanded “better conditions of work in all the factories. We are determined.”

The workers’ demand for better wages arises as they try to stem the tide of increasing inflation, which has increased from 12.4 percent last August to more than 15 percent in May.

The striking workers are employed by subcontractors for some of the world’s largest clothing manufacturers. Among the companies being struck are Willbes Haitian, MGA Haïti, Astro Carton d’Haïti, Haïti Cheung Won, Textile Youm Kwang, and Pacific Sports Haïti, according to *Le Nouvelliste*.

In a letter to the Haitian Prime Minister Jack Guy Lafontant, these six companies wrote, “we are presenting an official demand to put an end to these problems ... If, in the future, these demonstrations are not contained, we will find ourselves forced to look for

other alternatives.”

Seeking to keep the prime minister in their pockets, they continued: “competitive costs, the quality of production and proximity to the United States are the reasons we chose Haiti ... If these advantages cease to exist, we will need to proceed with other strategic arrangements and leave Haiti.”

On June 7, President Jovenel Moïse responded to the strike by appointing new members of the Superior Council on Salaries (CSS). This body includes three government members, three bosses, and three union leaders, including Dominique Saint-Éloi of the National Union of Haitian Workers (CNOHA). CNOHA was represented in Monday’s march.

According to *AlterPresse*, Saint-Éloi is refusing to take his seat on the council because another of the union representatives, Pierre Joseph Polycarpe, was willing to settle for a minimum wage of 250 gourdes in negotiations that took place in 2014.

The third union leader on the CSS, Fritz Charles, is on the governing body of the Respè political party. Its former presidential candidate, Charles Henry Baker, was a member of the Group of 184 that was instrumental in overthrowing Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004; André Apaid, a leader of the Group of 184, is one of the most ruthless and notorious textile bosses in Haiti.

Fig nolé St-Cyr, Secretary General of Haitian Self-Employed Workers’ Union, has taken the tack of appealing to the Haitian president while giving lip service to the strike. On Monday he told Magik 9 radio that “it is the responsibility of the President of the Republic to convoke a meeting of unions, bosses, and economists.” While opposing the new members of the CSS, he didn’t say how his proposal would differ.

In November 2014, as Polycarpe was trying to sell

out workers, the Toronto *Globe and Mail* published an article describing the conditions facing apparel workers in Port-au-Prince. The paper interviewed a worker named Jean-Robert Louis, who had been fired by the Gildan corporation because he participated in a protest demanding an increase in the minimum wage to 500 gourdes per day.

“Haitians are used to fighting against hunger,” Louis said, “we survive with only salt and water. But we are not healthy.”

Another worker, the mother of three sons, said, “we are not treated like humans, we are treated like animals. I am living a miserable life.”

Even the miserably low minimum wage mandated by the government is not honored. In 2013, the Workers Rights Consortium, an advocacy group that advises colleges on where to buy t-shirts and other clothing with logos, published a report documenting that Haitian workers “were seeing roughly one third of their legally-earned wages being effectively stolen every pay period” through employer practices that include paying below the minimum wage.

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